

III

> SECURE YOUR FUTURE – RE-INVEST IN THE CORPORATION <

A street.

Like all streets everywhere, pressure-overfilled by the visual noise, ear-wadding noise, odor-soup noise, designed to stimulate, distract, insinuate, manipulate, or flat-out bludgeon each consumer target into programmed-response submission: comply, want, eat, wear, pose, go, come, avoid, lie, gain advantage, report, CONFORM.

None of it registered on him over lunch any more than it did any other time . . . which was why, when it all abruptly, simultaneously – stopped –

> TIME TO ENHANCE YOUR HEALTH PROTEC-

he didn't react the way everyone else around him did. For a moment . . . or a few... sitting amongst the planters by the 'good citizen' blister, where no-one would bother him . . . munching on the food he'd packed for work in his study . . .

Even after the first yelps and screams. . . absently staring through the noise of the world . . . no triggered file . . . just something not the same about the din . . .

He switches in his focus . . .

The last trailing screams peel off/away to expose an underlayer of confused questioning voices. The cold-damp of fear seeps into them . . . saturates . . . wells up like rising floodwaters that inundate all . . . until their voices dwindle down to an ominously alien silence . . . a fear sea, marked with scattered tiny islands of disarrayed mutterings . . . adrift and losing ground to terror . . .

It's all blank – signs, monitors, adverts, prompts, cues, every device – clocks, passcards, e-books, wristberries, implants, phones, scanners, lasers, tasers, I.D.'s datalinks, smart weapons, surveillance, seals, locks – all dead. Every system – credit files, the nets, citizen records, quarantine, security – all wiped, from the largest corporate state mainframe to vid-playing greeting cards . . . matte black mute surfaces. And the motion, the energy surgings of masses, purposeful with somewhere to be and something to do, have suddenly ceased to flow. Entropy has chilled it all down to puny captive ripples of twisting heads and aimless shuffling feet. As if all at once, billions of hiss-spluttering balloons deflated, streets littered as far as the eye can see with heel-dragged used rubber on concrete. Broken doll pedestrians. Slid vehicles now inert lumps of plastmetal strewn against whatever they bumper-carred to a halt into. Airbag thumping, belt trapped occupants pounding at windows, unable to release doorlocks, roll windows or wheels. Tubetrains stuck like spitballs in a plugged straw.

Everywhere he looks, he sees infant-wide eyes darting panicky from dead to dead to dead screens all around them, to dead LCD's and LED's all worn by them. Ears straining for any slightest flutter of sound from any speaker ; sized from building-top billboard to micro-implant – not a one emits so much as the minutest hiss.

Hands now reach out to touch the dead machines – to prompt, press, jostle the blank mute boxes of all sizes. Fingers prod, poke, tap, slap, shake to revive, and finally grip-fear clench the alien silence . . .

Their world has gone away . . . and there is no other to take its place. They can't imagine what else could – their imaginations bled away generations ago . . . Harlan's glass teats all mummified . . . no power . . . no light . . . no instructions . . .

No electrons flowing through anything anywhere.

The social fabric is woven from the wool of its sheep. As time crawls by unmarked, the wool on the sheep unravels. It trails after them in their milling about, dragging around tangles under feet . . . aimless steps snag, trip into colliding each other shoving, turbulence twists knots of tension snare tighten and choke . . . break loose tear away clutched thing, no mine smash and grab run, chase fight falls hard, yanks back run away there, no where, run uniforms, gear, more uniforms here, wall there stop where, you are surrounded halt grab hit bad hurt mad hit street hurt beat hit hurt hit heart beat hard beat stop beat stop bleed step head crush blood rush dead hate red streets burn, smoke churns, rest fled . . . left dead . . . skies boil overhead a storm comes like none before . . .

Fear herds all.

Nature – sole final power – roars.

The tremors, the paralyzing terror cringe of buildings cracking open and crumbling has subsided for some minutes. He emerges from his hiding blister, where no-one would think to look, shoving, digging through the rubble piled against it, glancing up often if there's more coming.

Stumbling out over debris into the street he finds he stand alone in the midst of everything loose whipped around by the coarse dust wind. Twisting cyclonic whorls hunt for prey between the stricken buildings. The dust-smoke-cloud shifting shroud luminesces grey-orange from sunset . . . or fires. Where a pressure updraft sweeps it aside there's a glimpse of huge writhing mythological hydra thunderheads poised above the tiny lone figure – wind yanked clothes, eyes slitted against the grit, arms up against debris. For a few seconds he is transfixed. Before he can move, a vortex materializes out of the dust in front of him, roaring in his ears it convulses itself into a roiling typhonic sphere and implodes – a sonic boom sucked in on itself . . .

In that bubble in the maelstrom, the energies are momentarily spent – its power suspended, the wind dies out, bits waft down, dust sinks . . . revealing the lone figure in the street . . . gone.

The last sensation Aldous has is of every cell in his body being pulled forward simultaneously . . . then blackness.

His first returning sensations are of cool . . . soft . . . moist, coarse furry – his eyes snap open to green . . . He is lying on grass – real vegetable matter growing in soil aroma grass! He shifts around slightly. All his parts seem to be present and functioning. No pains anywhere, only a general stiff inertia. He pats himself down, looking at his hands. There's no blood. Pushing himself to prop up on his hands, he twists around to survey where he is – he sees there is no city!

His fingers disengage themselves with reluctance from the touch of the living grass, as he wills himself to stand.

There is no artificial din – only birds, unfamiliarly fragrant air, slight breeze, serene nimbus streaked sky, bright orange sun rising out of the forest bordering this meadow, sloping down to the west . . . flanking hills . . . distant but clear air distinct mountains to the north. No sign of what just happened . . . or did it?

Forty striding paces away, there are people of different sorts, sizes and shapes. Some very different, more different than one would expect the word 'people' could accommodate. He rotates. They are in a circle around him, and he appears to be quite literally the centre of their attention. Anxiety wells up in him, but levels out before reaching alarm. There are no sleekly intimidating vehicles. No uniforms bristling with paraphernalien menace. No loudspeaker orders, pulsing lights or targeting lasers. Just the sunrise, and the birds, and the people all dressed differently without visible equipment, except some bicycles . . . and other more complicated things evolved from bicycles.

Against all his instincts for anonymity, he yields to the necessity of this inexplicable circumstance and says, "Um . . . hullo?"

There is a ripple of reaction from them, as if they're straining to hear – so he marshals a stronger push of air, crisper diction and diaphragms, "Hello – where am I?!" Instantly his whole being shrinks back down from the conspicuousness of the shouted inquiry.

"Hello!" shouts back one who starts to approach. "Welcome." He gestures enthusiastically "Come to me! You don't want to be lingering at a transferpoint. Sometimes they can stutter!"

Noticing the others in the circle motioning that he go to him, Aldous drifts toward him. "What?! Who are you?!"

"I'm the one who speaks English. Hurry, you don't want to pop out again – God knows where!"

Aldous quickens his pace. "Where am I?"

"This is Transferworld. Welcome." They meet – the man takes Aldous by the arm. He's all in lived-in pale earthtones. A long loose coat, shirt, pants and rumply soft leather boots. His greying sandy hair plays on his shoulders, trimmed beard frames an easy warm smile, and his blue grey eyes have the genuine calm of one for whom all this is quite routine.

"Transferworld?" Aldous asks. "What does that mean?" He glances nervously at an overly tall couple in the circle who seem to be moving as though their limbs were jointed like deckchairs.

The man notices, but passes it by. "It means the world that people like you, me, all of us –," he sweeps an arm across the circle which is already starting to disperse, "–transfer to – from wherever and whenever you're from . . ." He grins pleasantly as he hustles Aldous further from his point of arrival.

"Wherever *I'm* from?!" says Aldous, incredulous, then double takes, "wha – what do you mean *whenever*?"

The man rolls on seamlessly. "When, yes. What planet and year are you from?"

"What plan– the Earth! What planet are *you* from?"

"Mars. What year?" He might as well be checking shoe size.

Aldous focuses in on the minutiae of his facial and body expression. Microinflections of the eyes, pupil and skin changes, postural motion and attitude. But it all reads as open – free. 'Unheard of,' Aldous thinks. He definitely would have memorized it if he'd ever met anyone like this before. He triggers no files, and there's no telltale overcompensation, or the blank plastic maskness that goes with programming. Stranger still, there's no slimy probing or edge of menace like there is with officers.

Maybe he really *is* from Mars.

To check his reaction, Aldous disengages from him, but the man's attention is on the sky.

"Good . . looks stable. But no harm in being cautious. Just a little further this way." He smiles back at Aldous and says, "What year?"

"Uuhh . . 2057 . . ," Aldous mouths distractedly.

The man nods with insight. "Ah – you must have been one of the first to go – I went years after earth went dark"

"I don't understand . . ." Aldous says weakly.

"When you left has no bearing on when you arrive," the man explains. "You left Earth years before I popped off Mars, but I arrived here years before you. . ."

Aldous' head is adrift.

"What . . .year . . .is it now?"

"No one knows," he replies casually, "no way to choose what year it should be." Aldous stares at him like he had daffodils growing out of his head instead of hair – and a daftly obvious question blurts out of him.

"Aren't there any calendars?"

"No need. Everyone knows what season it is."

A daftly obvious answer.

"Is this . . . not Earth?" Aldous hears himself asking from far away.

The man gamely tries to reassure his guest. "Oh no, I'm not saying this is not Earth. . . It's like Earth in a lot of ways . . . in other ways it's not like Earth at all . . uh – at least not like the Earth you know . . . knew." They stop walking and rallying with a smile, the man presents the vista all around them. "It's beautiful though, isn't it?" he mutters an aside, ". . . I missed the green . . ."

Aldous' stare follows the gesture across the countryside, but gets stuck on the overall walking deckchairs couple.

They and the other people are too distant to join in the conversation and show no immediacy to approach, but neither do they ignore. There are genial nods and waves and a few gestures Aldous doesn't recognize. Between each other, though, they have a familiarity that noticeably transcends their conspicuous disparities.

Out of the corner of his eye he catches a stocky four-foot-tall robed figure sliding along the grass in a fast-motion shuffle. "Uuhh . . . whoo . . .?"

"That's one of the Potters – and the tall ones were the Smiths. That's what we call them – can't pronounce their real names . . ."

Aldous clarifies the subject of his inquiry, "Who are *you*?"

"Oh – River."

Aldous' tenuous grip on his surroundings results – for a second – in his reflexively glancing about for one . . . then, "Oh . . . that's . . . your name?"

"Yeah, I like rivers; so I chose that. You can choose whatever name you like for yourself here." He gestures at what appears to be a handmade wrought-metal bicycle with a wicker basket chair sidecar. Most of the dispersed circle people are likewise mounting their own varied contraptions.

". . . Choose . . .?" delayed echoes Aldous, as he figures how to sit into the sidecar. He is fascinated by the obviously unmanufactured, yet ingeniously improvised handiwork. He feels fairly certain that he's never seen that before either. Then again, he's equally fairly certain about the utter unfamiliarity of *any* of these surroundings.

His mind hunting for a foothold, he says absently, ". . . My name is Aldous."

Before he can finish with his middle and surnames, River upbeatly interrupts, "Aldous – pleased you joined us. That's the name your parents chose for you – after Aldous Huxley, right?"

He automatically slips into his 'redirect the issue and make them go away' response. "Aldous who? My mother used to tell me that she just liked the sound of it – because it's old English. She said it meant something about 'old place' . . ."

River grins unaccusingly. "Relax, there's no banned authors here. You can decide later whether you want to change it. I like it, though." He stands on the pedals to push through inertia. "You can help." Aldous obliges on the pedals below his footrest. As they move out he notes the sophisticated gearing mechanism and that the hand-worked metal is not ferrous, but something much lighter, yet the wrong color for aluminum.

Then he notices how most of the disbanded circle are making their way westward down the gentle slope of the meadow, the same way he and River are.

"Wh. . . where are we going?" Aldous, still pedaling, asks him.

"English," River answers.

"What? I said it in English."

"Oh – no. That's what we call that part of the community. It's clumped by language."

"Clumped?"

River shrugs. "Our community is . . . made of smaller groupings – by language."

Aldous' natural guardedness seeps into his voice. "What . . . type of community is it?"

"The only one we've got," he says easily, "Oh, we think there's probably others . . . somewhere. But we couldn't outfit an expedition like that. No telling how far it'd have to go before finding anyone."

Aldous searches for a firmer grasp on the situation. All he can find, though, are the edges of the sidecar and the loose group of folk, all strangers, and all migrating in the same direction. In that distance, he can make out a settlement of, well, clumped roundish structures, white and earthtones with daubs of colours, all looking very indigenous, like those in books about old European and middle Eastern towns of hundreds of years past.

Nothing even remotely resembling a modern city. Surrounded by fields and forests, nearby river, and no other signs of civilization as far as he can see.

"Is, ah, that where . . . all these people live?"

"And more. Oh, don't worry, we've got a room for you, basic things you're going to need: toothbrush, soap, towels, underwear, clothes—" River leans over with a grin. "Don't imagine you had time to pack. Heh-heh. It's an old joke. I tell it every time."

Aldous' face manages only a weak wince.

"You're pretty average build. We'll have something that'll fit you. If you're hungry, thirsty, we'll get a meal together. No TV, though. That's another joke . . . you'll get it later."

Still not managing a smile, Aldous gropes about for coherent questions. "Is this . . . oh . . . yes . . . you said it is – the only community? It looks so small."

"I always thought it was a bit crowded, but then I came from a very . . . sparse neighborhood. Compared to where you're from, there isn't much of a population here. But what there is," he chuckles, "is surprisingly cosmopolitan." The grin returns, but there's no edge or sarcasm to it, just an easy-going assurance for the guest. It's working as far as keeping Aldous' alarm at bay, but there's a ways to go yet before he'll feel at ease. His survival instincts require the feeling of firm footing, sanctuary, bearings.

"Where I'm from . . ." Aldous repeats, then he fixes on River, "I need to know how I got here, and where – what – exactly, is here!"

River absorbs his stare and question-bolt with a sympathetic tilt of the head and replies, "What do you remember doing in the moments just before you got here?"

About this, Aldous has no trouble with recall. It was indelibly imprinted on his mind and he relives it in the retelling.

"I wasn't doing much of anything . . . I'd just come out of hiding . . . from the tremors . . . There was rubble everywhere, buildings wrecked, dust winds, no power. And there were no people . . ." He stares at River, confounded most by this last aspect, "I was alone in the street, and the storm in the sky was . . . huge and terrible. It was frightening . . . but exhilarating."

River nods, appreciating the sentiment. "And then?"

"Then a . . . whirlwind, like a tornado on end, just appeared in front of me, over me and . . . next . . . I woke up here."

"And that's it." River affirms with a gesture of finality. "Except for the . . . point of origin part, every transferee will tell the same brief story. One moment you're living your life as usual, minding your business. Next moment – wind, storm, others run, you're standing there – then – big hole, mind goes blank and voila – you wake up here. On this end, if we can get to the transferpoint in time, we form a greeting circle and . . . wait for the transferee to say

something. Whoever recognizes the language helps the newcomer get acclimated.” River flashes his grin at his passenger and quips, “How we doin’ so far?”

This last dose of River’s persistent easy optimism finally works its way through Aldous’ immediate confusion and apprehension . . . and reaches him. Aldous shrugs, waggles his head. Words don’t come in response. But River picks up on the touch of connection and does his best to reinforce it.

“It’s what happened to me – many seasons ago –” he tells Aldous in earnest. “Woke up in a circle, just like you did. Lucky for me, too. Would’ve suffocated otherwise.”

“Suffocated? Why would you?” Aldous noses the air around them.

“I was in my E.V.A. suit outside the hab – habitat,” River leans in the point, “on Mars. Just doing routine tests, when the vortex . . .took me. The instant I transferred in, the suit stopped working. So there’s me, unconscious ; them, not knowing how to take it off ; so they smashed the visor with a rock, woke me up and got me breathing again.”

“Why did it stop working – the suit?” Aldous has only one memory about the existence of a small base established on Mars years before, for corporate interests. There are no other details. It was something he could never pass the qualifying tests for, so it was irrelevant to him, but knowing of its existence is just enough to keep Aldous talking with this . . . out of the blue, amiably eccentric and seemingly genuine stranger.

In response to Aldous’ question, River says, “You got any . . .gadgets with you?”

Aldous rummages through his various pockets, fishing out ; “Computer, phone . . .” He stares at their blank screens.

“Paperweights now,” River says. “Nothing electronic or electrical works here.”

Poking them quickly confirms the statement. Aldous considers this new information and asks, “Is that why I haven’t seen any equipment . . . or powered vehicles?”

“Oh, we have equipment, machines, even powered vehicles. Just nothing that uses electricity.”

“Not even solar energy?” Aldous asks mistakenly.

“We use solar, just not electronic. Nothing so much as a battery powered flashlight.”

Checking with a glance for Aldous’ further curiosity, River continues his orientation chat in his matter-of-fact good humour. “It’s something about the electromagnetic fields. . . fluxes . . quantum-whatever-it-is that makes Transferworld work. The ‘vortexes’ that pop people in and out of here.”

“Out?” Aldous’ apprehension jumps again.

“Yeah, but since no one knows where they’d end up, there hasn’t been a volunteer in a long time.” He glances over again. Aldous’ expression speaks volumes. “We have a warning system.” He says. Aldous’ acute fear eases off, but all the rest of the turmoil is still in there, churning, subsurface.

River flows on, “Don’t worry that you don’t understand it . . . neither do we, really. But it’s a good life here, pretty comfortable, once you get used to no electricity. And a few times a season people appear, like you did, from somewhere and somewhen.” He flashes his teeth and shrugs, “Transferring . . . Transferworld . . is just what we call it in English. The other languages have other names for it, and the other forms have their families of languages. Languages and forms are the only groupings of people we have here, so the more languages you

learn, the more friends you can have. Course – uh – not many human folks have been able to learn the other forms' languages. Mostly it's the other forms that learn ours. Strange how that is – kind of ironic. . .”

“Whu-wha-what do you mean . . other forms . . ?”

“Lifeforms. Other planets. Out there – orbiting other stars.”

Aldous stares, considering this new information.

River elaborates. “That is. . . the ones that breathe nitrogen/oxygen air . . . ah. . . there have been a few that couldn't.” For the first time, River's whole demeanor sinks and his eyes lose their untroubled spirit. “Terrible. We couldn't do anything for them. No technology to analyze or synthesize a different atmosphere.” His voice squeezes past painful remembering. “As soon as it transferred in, it was in trouble. When we ran up, none of us could identify the species, but we could still smell the last of the atmosphere that came with it. Ik't'r Smith tried to identify that by scent, when the chemtests weren't enough . . we put the hood . . uh . . . breathing hood on it. Smith lit the compounds, but it was already in convulsions. Didn't help.”

Aldous questions cautiously, “It . . died?”

A grim nod from River.

“ . . Um . . why do you call it . . an it?”

“Unknown form. We couldn't tell if it was male, female or neither.” River answers, regret weighing on him. “I've seen three die. There've been others we heard about over the generations. It's the only really bad thing about this place. Most of us come from about half a dozen different worlds, but there have been transferees from who-knows-where. No way to know what the range is, and the transfer points form at different locations within a zone. We can't always get to them quickly enough.” River stops talking, deciding enough has been said in that direction.

As for Aldous, his mind racing to process all the data coming in at cubistic angles, he wonders when his fingernail grip on this divergent reality might slip. In this pause, he checks to establish a firmer footing.

“Forms . . from other planets, other . . stars . . living here . . .”

“Yes,” River nods, coasting in neutral.

“With you . . us . . human folks . . .”

River begins to come up from the somber deep. “Yes – lots of them.”

“What kind of . . . ‘forms’ are they? Any of them . . . dangerous?”

“Dangerous?!” River's prior energy re-emerges. “Why should they be? Hah! Remember where you came from? It's *us* – humans – that're the most dangerous! Henh – everyone else is civilized . . .”

“Actually . . .” Aldous rephrases, a tinge embarrassed. “I meant alien. . . creatures . . .like animals.”

“Oh – no.” River says, more buoyant. “They're all people – wildlife forms never come through. They all have the sense to run.” He shakes his head, chuckling. “It's only us ‘intelligent’ forms that'll stand rooted to the spot, staring, while a socking great whirlwind appears on top of them, sucks them halfway across known space and drops 'em here. Anyway, without all the forms, us human transferees would never have survived. There'd be no living here.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re useless,” he tosses back with a glance. His easy, untroubled positive mood returns. “Without our support systems, society, gadgets, we humanfolk don’t know anything practical. It’s the other forms, the Smiths, the Potters, the Wrights – coming from pre-industrial worlds – they have the skills. It’s *them* that developed most of our technology and taught *us*. Now everyone does their bit and we all have a decent life here.”

Thinking of his previous life, Aldous ventures a hopeful extrapolation. “Does that mean . . . that everyone is . . . equal?”

“Equal?!” River laughs. “Certainly not. Everyone’s different. It’d be useless if everyone were the same. We could all only do the same thing. No one could do all the *different* things everyone needs. Right?” The grin returns.

Still on the same lines of thought, Aldous ventures to test a little further. “What about conformity?”

“To what?” River says flat.

“To . . . what society requires . . .,” Aldous volleys back.

“Nah. Too pretentious,” River dismisses. He points to the settlement they, and all the other contraption-cyclists, are nearing. “Does that look anything like a conformist society?”

Aldous stares at the little rounded buildings nestled in the rolling wilderness all around them. . . which for him did not exist twenty minutes ago.

But the grass he felt . . . the fresh aromatic air, the birds. It certainly feels, smells and sounds real. This thing he’s riding in, the dips and bumps in the ground. This strange man and the others in the circle. All of it now converges on that one ancient Rome-like town.

V

A street – unlike any Aldous has ever seen: little, crooked, hugged in by motley polymorphic buildings growing out of each other for support. The road keeps them just far enough apart for pedestrians and sidecar cycles to pass each other, and for the afternoon sun to warm them.

There are no screens or speakers, signs or orders flashing or blaring, pushing continuous tides of visual-audio noise at him.

Only people talking, children playing, pedals cranking . . . and more birds. For Aldous, it’s like suddenly being free of a straitjacket he’s been constricted in his whole life. Difficult to know what to do first . . . flap his arms like the birds . . . ?

Add to that, the surroundings don’t impose any pristine, coldhard manufactured gridness ; no prescribed sterilized cosmetic masking. Everything he sees has a genuineness – of being fashioned, rather than manufactured. The buildings – ranging from one to six stories – are mostly of similar construction techniques, yet no two are alike in form or configuration. Some are ordinary. Some beautiful. Some whimsical. Some are domed, others vaulted, still others go off on their own angles.

There is glass in all the windows, but instead of dead flat – minute shimmers and dances of light play off of it as one walks past. The walls are coated and smoothed, but not machined sterile. There are clues that they are of fired brick, which would account for the diversity of

form, but in open doorways their apparent thickness seems a fraction of what masonry would need to be to support itself, even with the folded and undulating shapes. And there are other telltale anomalies . . .

A marked propensity to curves and triangles and an equally conspicuous scarcity of right angles – in everything. Structural gymnastics with cables and convoluted shells. Constructions in gothic tracery and glass that seem too delicate to stand. Intricately wrought metal trusses spanning much farther than possible if they were steel. . .

Pre-industrial culture indeed, thinks Aldous.

Hearing of the contribution of 'other forms' pales against seeing the evidence of it imprinted in things around him. The impression from a distance of an ancient Roman town vanishes, replaced by a manifest renaissance dimensionality, with leaps of sophistication surpassing the modern city he's come from only an hour ago.

The street meanders off to branch into a spiderweb of others just like it . . . only different. Avenues, alleyways, courtyards, and roundabouts . . .all of it eclectic . . . yet there is a permeating feel of it all having grown naturally, without clash. Not forced – a free, even playful spirit, but with hints of great age – and everywhere overgrown with the clutter and layered textures of everyday life, draped on the architecture like mosses on old growth trees.

It could not be more *unlike* a corporate-state city, however small. In fact, in the world that Aldous knows – knew – a place like this would never be allowed to exist.

Where that world is now – or when . . .what happened to it?

He's spent a lifetime working out ways of surviving in it – alone among millions . . . now *this?!*

What does this mean?! That . . . he'll have to start over? How? With what?

What . . . kind of people live here? He's only really met one . . .

Aldous feels a great weariness pressing down on him.